

Letter from Scotland



Pulling in different directions...the Kelpies enjoying the election.

They say it's going to be the closest general election for a generation. But not in Scotland. One opinion poll, Ipsos Mori, puts SNP support at 54 per cent, the culmination of a rising tide, and enough to give the SNP every seat in Scotland.

This might well be an exaggeration and it's worth remembering that a third of voters have not yet made up their minds. But there's now no doubt that the SNP will do well on Thursday.

This has put all the parties into a state of bewilderment, not to say panic. The SNP themselves can't quite believe what they are reading in the opinion polls or in the Sun newspaper, which has come out in their favour. Nicola Sturgeon says no vote is being taken for granted. She is being flown around the country in her specially liveried helicopter to deliver her defiant message against "austerity" and for a strong Scottish voice at Westminster.

Labour leaders north and south of the border insist a vote for the SNP is a vote to put the Tories back into power. But Nicola Sturgeon says Ed Miliband's insistence that he will not make a deal with the SNP will do precisely that. David Cameron meanwhile has been shoring up his core Conservative vote with a promise of no increase in taxes for the next five years.

I was fascinated to hear the views of my Scouts (11-14 year olds) on all this so-called adult behaviour. We were holding a "civics" night and asking the patrols to draw up their manifestos for the election. Along with the expected calls for

“no more homework” and “more money for rugby” there were several mentions of food banks, a higher minimum wage, no zero-hours contracts and quite a few worries about immigration. In the quiz that followed, most patrols were scoring at least 15 out of 20 for general knowledge about the election. Our political future is assured.

To judge from the media, we will wake up on Friday morning to Armageddon. No party will have won an outright majority of the 650 seats at Westminster. The media and the financial markets will then insist on a coalition, preferably after a week of frenzied, bleary-eyed, panic-stricken, behind-closed-doors meetings and incoherent press briefings. This really IS adult behaviour.

How much happier we would all be, if the largest party were simply invited by the Queen to form a government immediately and then for it to bring each of its measures forward, one at a time, for open debate and decision in parliament. Parties could then stay pure to their manifestos. We would have a leisured and open national debate about each issue and a truly democratic decision taken by a majority of the 650 MPs we elect. Minority governments are no more unstable than coalitions and in Scotland Alex Salmond showed how it could be done between 2007 and 2011. My own prediction, for what it's worth, is that we will have a minority government when that week of media-induced panic and failure is over.

And I rather fear the Institute of Fiscal Studies is right when it forecast this week that average incomes are set to decline whoever leads the next government. There was a hint of this when the latest growth figures were published on Tuesday showing that the economy is slowing down again, with the slowest rate of growth for more than two years.

Over 300 workers at the Tullis Russell paper mill in Fife felt the cold wind of recession this week when they were told the mill has gone into administration after making losses of

£18.5m over the last five years. This is a real tragedy for the dream of worker-ownership. The 200-year old paper mill was handed over to its workers in the 1980s and they had hoped to come through the recession in the paper-making industry by specialising in high-quality card. Only last month the company opened a £200m bio-mass power plant. The trade unions are now asking questions about how the directors have been running the company. All may not be lost however, as a potential buyer has emerged, at least for part of the mill, in the form of PG Paper, a company trading in paper products for India and owned by the Gupta family from Kilmacolm near Glasgow.

The other big news this week has been a record drugs find on board a ship in Aberdeen harbour. £500m worth of cocaine was discovered hidden on the MV Hamal after it had been arrested at sea by the Royal Navy frigate HMS Somerset and a Border Force cutter vessel, the Valiant. The operation was masterminded by the National Crime Agency in co-operation with the French customs investigation service. Nine crew members of the MV Hamal, all Turkish citizens, were arrested and have appeared in court in Aberdeen charged with drug offences. More than three tonnes of cocaine were found after a thorough search of the vessel. It's five times the amount of any previous drugs haul in the UK.

I wasn't there myself, but I gather the annual 1st of May Beltane Fire Festival on Calton Hill in Edinburgh went off with a blaze. A 12ft high effigy of the wicker man was burnt and over 5000 joyful souls watched as the evils of the winter were consumed and the first clear skies of the summer were kissed into life by the rising sun. Oh to have been there on that happy dawn. I wonder what we shall be celebrating when the sun comes up on the political landscape next Friday morning.